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Mark Byers

R. F. Langley: Seeing Things

Though R. F. Langley was committed—in his own words—to the ‘observation of fact’, his poetry and prose journals more often stage a variety of epistemological dilemma. More particularly, Langley’s writing frequently discovers a torque between (in Bertrand Russell’s terms) knowledge by ‘acquaintance’ and knowledge by ‘description’. This essay approaches Langley’s negotiation of these positions via his response to earlier modernisms, especially those of Ezra Pound, Charles Olson and the art critic Adrian Stokes. Langley’s work, it is suggested, furthered and refined a modernist concern with perception and knowledge even as later modernist poetics departed from questions of epistemology towards those of semiotics and linguistics.

In an essay first published in 1911, Bertrand Russell made an influential distinction between two varieties of knowledge. On the one hand, says Russell, we can speak of knowledge by ‘acquaintance’, which involves a ‘direct cognitive relation’ to an object.¹ On the other hand, there is knowledge by ‘description’, in which the thing known assumes the form of “‘a so-and-so’” or “‘the so-and-so’”.² Knowledge by acquaintance is direct and unmediated; knowledge by description is mediated and propositional. While knowledge by acquaintance includes knowledge of sense-data, knowledge by description includes everything beyond our immediate experience, including knowledge of physical things and other people’s minds.³

R. F. Langley was probably not familiar with this epistemological distinction at first hand, but the discrepancy it implies between mediated and immediate knowledge was reflected in his own practice, particularly in its extended negotiation with earlier modernist poetry. Late modernism, in Langley’s oeuvre, attends to problems in epistemology and aesthetics which had come to the fore of modernist poetics and art writing, particularly in the work of his major forebears, Ezra Pound and Adrian Stokes. A feature of his broader philosophical and theoretical concerns (which included, prominently, object-relations psychoanalytic theory), the distinction

¹ Bertrand Russell, ‘Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 11 (1910-11), 108-28 (p. 108).

² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³ *Ibid.*

between direct and mediated knowledge represents a major part of Langley's sustained conversation with English poetics generally and American modernism in particular.

Langley began his reading in modernism in the late 1950s, a moment when English poetry, under the sway of the Movement, had become defiantly risk-averse.⁴ Reaching Jesus College, Cambridge on a scholarship in 1957, he became close to J. H. Prynne and studied the American modernists (particularly Pound) with Donald Davie, in addition to Stokes's art criticism.⁵ The publication of Donald Allen's anthology, *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* (1960), introduced Langley to more recent American poetry in the modernist line, particularly the Black Mountain and New York schools. In a 'questionnaire' completed for Matías Serra Bradford, he included—in addition to Wordsworth and Hopkins—'Oppen, Williams, O'Hara, Olson, a whole set of Americans of that time, maybe', as early touchstones.⁶ These poets represented the rigorously objective line in modernist anti-symbolism, deriving from the 'direct treatment' of Imagism.⁷ In their agile perceptiveness and outwardness, Williams's *Spring and All* (1923) and Oppen's *Discrete Series* (1934)—and even, perhaps, O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* (1964)—must have seemed more legitimate extensions out of Wordsworth and Hopkins than the English 'Movement'. This early fusion of English and American poetics, the lyric tradition and modernist free verse, would continue to inform Langley's work as it committed itself to 'getting in close to observation of fact'.⁸ Be it an oak carving in a Suffolk church, the Mildenhall Great Dish or a

⁴ See, among others, Andrew Duncan, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003).

⁵ Peter Riley, 'RF Langley obituary', *The Guardian* (7 March 2011) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/07/rf-langley-obituary>> [accessed 24 February 2016]. See also Jeremy Noel-Tod, 'Introduction', in R. F. Langley, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Jeremy Noel-Tod (Manchester: Carcanet, 2015), p. ix. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text as CP.

⁶ Matías Serra Bradford, 'The Long Question of Poetry: A Quiz for R.F. Langley', *PN Review* 37.5 (May/June 2011), 151-7 (p. 16).

⁷ Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect', in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 3.

⁸ Quoted in Bradford, 'The Long Question of Poetry', p. 16.

moth or butterfly, Langley's poems give themselves to exacting registrations (in Olson's words) of the 'objects of reality'.⁹

But Langley's fidelity to the 'facts' of the external world is rarely straightforward, and more frequently stages versions of an epistemological dilemma. More concretely, the poems (as well as the partly published *Journals*) are often subject to an acute ambivalence about the epistemological value and function of indirect or propositional knowledge; a philosophical problem that also bears strongly on more locally poetic questions of diction, syntax, rhythm and structure. On the one hand, Langley's empiricism is often informed by—and structured around—knowledge and theory derived from fields including natural history (particularly entomology and ornithology) and art history. On the other hand, his oeuvre registers the *obfuscation* presented by knowledge by description, sometimes appealing to a version of the philosophical *tabula rasa*; what is called, in several poems, 'emptiness' or 'nothing' (CP 14, 154). Ironically, perhaps, this position is itself indebted to literary precedents, as well as parallel lines of reasoning in the work of, for instance, John Cage and the British psychoanalyst Marion Milner.¹⁰

This torque between propositional knowledge and direct perception had been familiar enough to early and high modernism. Beginning with Impressionism, as Sara Danius has discussed, modernism's eyes often aspired to the mechanical innocence of the camera or the X-ray.¹¹ Pound, for instance, infamously claimed that the Chinese character is intelligible to anyone with a *natural* sense of 'pictorial values'.¹² Likewise, Pound's friend Stokes structured his criticism around a conception of art as visually and intellectually self-evident, 'something instant and

⁹ Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', in *Collected Prose*, ed. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 243.

¹⁰ Each mentioned by Langley in Bradford, 'The Long Question of Poetry', p. 16.

¹¹ Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 55.

¹² Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling and Lucas Klein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 59.

revealed'.¹³ Perhaps even more pertinent to Langley—who read and taught Shakespeare throughout his life—is Louis Zukofsky's principal 'theme' in the five-hundred page *Bottom: On Shakespeare* (1963): 'that Shakespeare's text throughout favors the *clear physical eye* against the erring brain' [emphasis mine].¹⁴ However, claims for optical innocence and immediacy were as much a rhetorical ploy—militating against 'habits of artistic perception'—as strategies achieved in fact.¹⁵ Pound's own perception was rarely so naïve, being invariably informed by myth, text, and memory. Similarly, while Stokes regarded the artwork as immanent and self-revealed, this did not prevent his own criticism bringing to bear a formidable command of art history. Meanwhile, Zukofsky's *Bottom* is itself a brilliant testament to the discursive, wayward pleasures of an 'erring' intellect.

This basic structural ambivalence about the value of knowledge by description as a supplement to knowledge by acquaintance is re-evaluated throughout Langley's small poetic oeuvre; a task which placed him at some distance from other developments in late modernist poetics (which have been concerned, on the whole, less with epistemological than with semiotic and linguistic problems). In this, Langley was—as he himself recognised—'out on a limb'.¹⁶ However, this tangentiality might also provoke an expanded critical conception of literary late modernism. Langley's concern with what it is to 'know' and 'see'—informed by mid-century art criticism and psychoanalysis, as well as American modernist poetry—further evidences the interpretability and variousness of modernism's legacies for contemporary English poetry.

¹³ Adrian Stokes, *The Quattro Cento and The Stones of Rimini* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 15.

¹⁴ Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky* (London: Rapp and Carroll, 1967), p. 159.

¹⁵ Danius, *The Senses of Modernism*, p. 55.

¹⁶ R. F. Langley and R. F. Walker, 'R. F. Langley Interviewed by R. F. Walker', in *Don't Start Me Talking: Interviews with Contemporary Poets*, ed. by Tim Allen and Andrew Duncan (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), p. 242.

“BLIND THINKING”

Towards the end of her journal *A Life of One's Own* (1934), one of a number of books Langley mentioned as having ‘read often’, the British psychoanalyst Marion Milner recorded a decision to abandon psychoanalytic theory, temporarily, for a more direct observation of the self and its experience of the world.¹⁷ In lieu of psychoanalytic ‘science’, Milner proposed to herself a form of ‘blind thinking’ which might redeem the world’s quiddity from the secondary ‘system of charts’ provided by psychoanalysis:

Science was perhaps a system of charts for finding the way, but no amount of chart-studying would give to inlandsmen the smell of a wind from the sea. So, at one time, with the usual ‘all-or-noneness’ of blind thinking, I had been inclined to repudiate the chart altogether because it was not also the sea.¹⁸

The hard lesson Milner claims to have learned—‘that I must never begin my search by looking in books’—may suggest, as Rachel Bowlby has said, ‘a little disingenuousness’.¹⁹ After all, the lesson is being offered to *readers*. However, ‘blind thinking’ has a distinguished modern provenance, being found at least as early as Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*. Descartes too had ‘abandoned the study of letters’, ‘resolving to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in myself or else in the great book of the world’.²⁰ The Book of Nature was later privileged—with ironic consequences—by Romantic poetry, including in Wordsworth’s ‘The Tables Turned’ (1798), where the reader is implored (with thirty-one lines to go) to ‘quit your books’ for the world outside.²¹

¹⁷ Quoted in Bradford, ‘The Long Question of Poetry’, p. 16.

¹⁸ Marion Milner, *A Life of One's Own* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 158-9. Rachel Bowlby quotes the passage in her ‘Introduction’ to this edition, p. xxv.

¹⁹ Milner, *A Life of One's Own*, p. 12. Bowlby, ‘Introduction’, p. xxv.

²⁰ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Vol. 1, p. 115.

²¹ William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. by James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 109.

Langley also stages this paradox, but with the addition of a further equivocation; for to ‘repudiate the chart’ and switch to ‘blind thinking’ is not—for all Descartes’s and Milner’s confidence—a matter of the will. This seems to be the sticking point of ‘The Upshot’. Not least in its bookishness—allusions to Proust, Olson and William Carlos Williams meet with etymological play—‘The Upshot’ acknowledges impediments to Zukofsky’s ‘physical eye’ presented by prior knowledge. Though Langley later revealed the scene of the poem to be St Andrew’s Church in Westhall, Suffolk, this information is studiously withheld from the reader.²² The result is an interpretive *punctum caecum* which bears directly upon the speaker’s own difficulty in seeing, knowing, and ‘achieving’:

We leave unachieved in the
 summer dusk. There was no
 need for you rather than me.
 Here is the unalterable truth.
 Outside the open door peculiar
 bugbears adopt the dark, then Kate
 passes across. Next to nothing
 depends on her coming in. (CP 12)

Proust, as Langley himself noted, provides the first sentence.²³ Yet the English adjective ‘unachieved’ is also telling. According to Skeat’s etymological dictionary (which Langley found indispensable), ‘achieve’ derives from the French phrase *venir a chief*; ‘to come to the end or arrive at one’s object’.²⁴ The difficulty of ‘arriving at one’s object’—when ‘object’ is understood, literally, as a ‘thing’—will be the matter of the following stanzas. Even here, however, the ambiguous inversion of Williams’s declaration in ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ (‘so much depends’

²² Langley and Walker, ‘R. F. Langley Interviewed by R. F. Walker’, p. 249.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ W. W. Skeat, *A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1911), p. 5.

becomes ‘Next to nothing | depends’) anticipates the problem of arriving at or *achieving* the ordinary things of the world.²⁵

Yet Langley’s objects are less mundane than Williams’s, at least in this poem. The second stanza introduces them as ‘eight absurd captains’ (CP 12); objects which the poet later glossed as the carved wooden ‘poppy heads’ adorning the church pews.²⁶ Again, however, the reader is not privy to this knowledge, and is therefore placed in a predicament equivalent to that of the speaker. These heads are ‘here’ independently of the viewer, ‘whether they are seen or not’, and this separation between subject and object appears unassailable. In the fifth stanza, the speaker even considers that, ‘There’s a chance Kate saw | more by not coming in’ (CP 13). That line might imply movement toward a rationalist position, empirical experience having been found wanting. But the penultimate stanza identifies the unknowableness of the eight poppy heads in a surplus, rather than a shortfall, of knowledge:

They stand up but don’t go. All ready,
not started. Full stretch in their rigid
heads. Now, when I need it, I’m so close
to emptiness. But I know too much about
each of those eight fixed faces. Unless
you ask about the eyes. You do. Here’s
the opening for the hundred tricks Kate
took by walking across, not looking in. (CP 14)

If ‘emptiness’ is a condition of understanding, what ‘I know’ will present an insuperable obstacle. This disruptive knowledge could be that of untrustworthy sense perception (the heads seen within a play of light and shadow, for instance). More likely, however, it is the kind of knowledge by description brought to the encounter itself; the information an inquiring reader might derive

²⁵ William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Charles Tomlinson (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 57. It is possible that Langley’s ‘bugbears’ allude to Adrian Stokes in *The Thread of Ariadne* (1925). In the third chapter of this, his first, book, Stokes comments: ‘Our bears are no longer in the wood, but rather in ourselves—the bugbear of introspection for instance’. Stokes, *The Thread of Ariadne* (London: Kegan Paul, 1925), p. 14.

²⁶ See Langley and Walker, ‘R. F. Langley Interviewed by R. F. Walker’, p. 249.

from works such as J. Charles Cox's *English Church Fittings, Furniture and Accessories* (1923), which clarifies that the term poppy head 'has no connection with the flowering plant of that name, but is derived from the French "poupee"—a puppet or figurehead'.²⁷ Might such propositional knowledge compromise the carving's sensuous immediacy? Perhaps, like Henri Gaudier-Brzeska faced with Chinese characters, genuine understanding of exterior objects requires the naiveté of blind thinking?

In his major early work, *The Quattro Cento*—particularly important to Langley—Adrian Stokes did not quite propose ignorance as the ground of aesthetic experience.²⁸ But, like Pound, Stokes insisted upon the *instantaneousness* of aesthetic perception and finds in the true 'Quattro Cento' style an appeal only to the physical eye. The fifteenth-century 'compulsion' to 'throw life outwards, to make expression definite on the stone', involved, says Stokes, a 'mass-effect in which every temporal or flux element was transformed into a spatial steadiness'.²⁹ This 'mass-effect' was self-revelatory: 'Stone is the greatest instrument of mass-effect, of *instant revelation*: non-rhythmic, for the flux of life has passed into objective forms' (emphasis mine).³⁰ For Stokes, 'Quattro Cento' sculpture—Verocchio's lavabo in the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence, for instance—is 'something instant and revealed'; a form of intellectual and emotional immediacy that is already self-complete.³¹ 'What I call purely visual matter,' he says later in the study, 'is dissociated from noise as well as from silence, from past, present and future. Things stand expressed, exposed, unaltered in the light, in space. Things stand.'³² 'Quattro Cento' work abolishes time in the creation of an art which can be understood by the 'synthesis that the eye alone of the senses can perform'.³³ There is no equivocation about such art, and no recourse to

²⁷ J. Charles Cox, *English Church Fittings, Furniture and Accessories* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1923), p. 109.

²⁸ See Bradford, 'The Long Question of Poetry', p. 16.

²⁹ Stokes, *The Quattro Cento*, p. 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ The six-page description of Verocchio's lavabo is Stokes's *pièce de résistance*. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–65.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

books; it strikes the viewer with an immediacy that is anterior to thought. Quite simply, in ‘Quattro Cento’ sculpture, ‘Things stand’.

This is not the experience of Langley’s speaker in ‘The Upshot’, however, who recognises that such instantaneous revelation will require a particular state of mind on the part of the viewer (and, indeed, the reader). As David Herd notes, the ‘emptiness’ introduced by Langley as the condition of this state might recall Olson in ‘Projective Verse’ (1950), particularly the injunction towards a ‘humilitas’ that will provide the ‘secrets objects share’.³⁴ But the trope is a pervasive one, finding further variations in Milner’s ‘blind thinking’ and Wallace Stevens’s ‘nothing himself’.³⁵ In his *Notes on Cinematography*, which Langley also records as reading frequently, Robert Bresson discussed shooting scenes in a similar way: ‘Put oneself into a state of intense ignorance and curiosity, and yet see things *in advance*’.³⁶ Though Jeremy Noel-Tod and Herd agree that the idea is a version of Keats’s ‘negative capability’, it also recalls Stevens’s source in the famous passage in Emerson’s ‘Nature’ (1836): ‘I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all’.³⁷

Even so, it is the irony of ‘The Upshot’ that however clearly the speaker recognises the value of emptiness or ‘intense ignorance’, the ‘transparent eye-ball’ or ‘blind thinking’ is not something that can be adopted at will or by choice. ‘I know too much’ suggests this, while the final stanza confirms that the speaker will leave without ‘achieving’ the carved faces on the pews.

We leave unachieved in the
summer dusk. There are no
maps of moonlight. Things
stand further off. We find

³⁴ Quoted in David Herd, ‘Emptying, Holding, Settling: The Poetry of R. F. Langley’, *Edinburgh Review* <<https://edinburgh-review.com/extracts/article-david-herd/>> [accessed 28 February 2016].

³⁵ Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 2nd edn. (New York: Vintage, 2015), p. 11.

³⁶ Bradford, ‘The Long Question of Poetry’, p. 16. Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, trans. by Jonathan Griffin (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), p. 8.

³⁷ Jeremy Noel-Tod, ‘Jeremy Noel-Tod remembers R. F. Langley, with Langley’s “Sixpence a Day”’, *Cambridge Literary Review* II/5 (Summer 2011), 71-8 (p. 71). Herd, ‘Emptying, Holding, Settling’, n.p. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. by Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 10.

peace in the room and don't
ask what won't be answered.
We don't know what we see, so
there is more here. More. Here.

(CP 14)

That adage, 'We don't know what we see', would not be out of place in Thoreau's journals ('I begin to see such an object when I cease to *understand* it', Thoreau says of Fair Haven Pond³⁸). However, this superlative form of seeing is frustrated in the church, precisely because the speaker knows 'too much'. Perhaps recalling Wittgenstein's conclusion to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* ('what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence'), the speaker finds 'peace in the room' and will not 'ask what won't be answered'.³⁹ That there is 'More. Here' might be a pledge to the immediate, but its stubbornness also registers epistemological frustration. There might be 'more here' but whatever that is remains inaccessible to a subject who already knows (like Kant's subject) 'too much' to grasp it instantaneously. Whereas for Stokes 'Things stand', for Langley 'Things | stand further off?'

'OPERATING ON VARIABLES'

'The Upshot' would appear to weigh heavily against knowledge by description, privileging optical innocence (however inaccessible) over second order experience ('we don't know what we see'). Even so, the language of the poem militates against too strict an interpretation of that position, forming an echo chamber in which the very fact of 'unachieving' situates the poem in a literary culture capacious enough to include Wordsworth, Proust, Emerson, Olson and Wittgenstein. This is the irony that would attend any reasoned or textual argument for blind seeing or any call for 'emptiness' in the excessive medium of literary discourse. It is also the irony that would see

³⁸ Henry David Thoreau, *A Writer's Journal*, ed. by Laurence Stapleton (New York: Dover, 1960), p. 23.

³⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 89. And, at 6.51: 'Doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something *can be said*', p. 88.

Stokes extend one famous evocation of ‘Quattro Cento’ immediacy over the course of six elaborately descriptive pages.⁴⁰

A poem published in the chapbook *Hem* (1978), ‘Matthew Glover’, registers this irony by mapping the epistemological distinction between acquaintance and description against another disputed boundary, that between prose and poetry. Langley described this poem, deprecatingly, as ‘a fairly naive attempt to do a miniscule Olson in an English setting’, and like Olson’s early ‘Maximus’ poems the poem draws strongly on assembled fact.⁴¹ Moreover, like the ‘Maximus’ poems, ‘Matthew Glover’ suggests a torsion between informational prose and lyric instancy, a distinction we might also be inclined to map against Zukofsky’s ‘erring brain’ and ‘physical eye’. However, the poem’s ostensible separation of these two modes is far from stable, and this insecurity comes to bear on the difficulty of detaching ‘empty’ lyric experience or ‘blind thinking’ from supporting factual knowledge (in this case, the social history of the English Midlands). To put this another way, ‘Matthew Glover’ will not quite accept its own provisional distinction between lyric perception and prose exposition.

The poem opens with an account, in right-stepping verse stanzas, of the first human settlement in a Staffordshire landscape, a ‘navel’ appearing ‘out of the trees’ (CP 25). This is indebted to several passages in Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959) where Eliade remarks upon the tendency of human settlements—following a near-universal religious notion that the universe was produced from a single centre—to develop outwards from a central node.⁴² The poem then cuts, almost cinematically, to the present, and to direct observation in clear empirical couplets:

the east edge of the parish now
is a stream in a sandy ditch;

⁴⁰ See Stokes, *The Quattro Cento*, pp. 59-65.

⁴¹ Langley and Walker, ‘R. F. Langley Interviewed by R. F. Walker’, p. 239.

⁴² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 45-7.

a shelterbelt banks it:
alder, willow, some bigger trees,

and the scene here is,
at the hedge corner,

a fine, detailed bush, dead,
a wicker cage now

where three or more warblers
hawk at the flies. (CP 26)

An accumulative, spondaic rhythm gives the impression that the ‘scene’ is not recollected in tranquillity but registered in real-time, maybe *en plein air*. With the exception of the ‘wicker cage’ (and a pun about warblers that ‘hawk’), the couplets are not figurative, observing the landscape without defamiliarising it. The indefinite article constructions (‘a stream’, ‘a sandy ditch’, ‘a shelterbelt’, ‘a fine, detailed brush’, ‘a wicker cage’) suggest an eye roving over the terrain. The transparency of the observations offers a counterpoint to the preceding, Eliade-derived lines, in which the landscape had been viewed, at one remove, through the medium of descriptive knowledge in anthropology and comparative religion. The shift into couplets registers not only a change of subject and temporality then, but, more substantively, a transition from one species of knowledge to another.

But these couplets are juxtaposed even more sharply with passages of outright exposition. The technique is that of Pound’s *Cantos* but sounds more like Olson, particularly the first volume of *The Maximus Poems*. On the left is Langley’s account of the Staffordshire enclosures, on the right Olson’s version of an early voyage to the New World, led, Olson believes, by John Watts.⁴³

Enclosures in this parish cut up
the Open Fields round its centre
before 1758 and took the Commons
30 yrs later, fast, from the
declaration on the church door

When he was Gloucester
it was after the Rush, after fish
had lost their market. England
plunged into two wars

⁴³ See George F. Butterick, *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 172.

to the Commissioners' meeting,
with maps and rules, at the 'Anchor',
15 days, one objector, one resident
undecided. From here we have,
minor changes only, the present fields,
squarish, five to ten acres, hedges
with quickthorn inset with elm,
spaced, bright willow by the waters.

the same years the first Gloucester
held the stage, in Commons & in mer-
chants' minds: 1624

war with Spain, 1626
war with France, & prices
knocked off the chance
a fishing station here

would pay.⁴⁴

(CP 27-8)

Tellingly, while Olson's passage is almost provocatively flat ('1624 | | war with Spain, 1626 | war with France'), Langley's retains a vestige of sensuous detail ('quickthorn inset with elm', 'bright willow by the waters'). Even so, these appear in a passage whose voice is otherwise dry and professorial: 'From here we have' might be sounded from the lectern. The overall tone is not quite oral, however, since the abbreviation '30 yrs' breaks the lyric illusion that we are overhearing a speaking voice, and frames the poem instead as a material text, perhaps in the form of hastily penned reading notes or marginalia. That this too is a fiction becomes apparent as soon as the lyric images detach themselves from the hard dates and facts, a transition that plays out over the course of a single sentence: 'five to ten acres, hedges | with quickthorn inset with elm, | spaced, bright willow by the waters'.⁴⁵ If the passage itself displays a kind of generic codeswitching or macaronic, this is true of the poem as a whole, which transitions between longer prosaic lines and compressed imagistic detail, propositional knowledge and the transparent physical eye. The sensuous and the cerebral are drawn apart, in other words, by formal device.

⁴⁴ Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, ed. by George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 119.

⁴⁵ 'Willow by the waters' (scanning *xu-uu-xu*) is audibly Poundian, sounding like Pound's numerous 'amid' constructions. Compare, for instance, 'Owl-eye amid pine boughs', Canto 21, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1996), p. 99.

Recouping and extending the examples provided by Pound, Olson and Williams, such juxtapositions appeared frequently in long-form topographic poetry of the 1970s. Iain Sinclair's *Lud Heat* (1975), for instance, shifted between poetry and prose in the course of drawing its cityscape around the six London churches of Nicholas Hawksmoor.⁴⁶ The technique is also found in work outside the British Poetry Revival, such as John Montague's *The Rough Field* (1972).⁴⁷ Yet the distinction between genres in 'Matthew Glover' is not as definitive as that in, for instance, Sinclair's book, so that the nominally discrete forms of thinking embodied by these forms begin to lose their autonomy. In the following lines, for instance, a two-line minimalist lyric evolves with only slight interruption into the recovered historical voice of Matthew Glover, who would not 'speak for or against' enclosure:

the small crack
willow is dull

until the low
wind creams it

up with a purr
like bunches of

paper it blows
it purrs it purrs

Owning very little land
rated at eightpence
very little soil

maybe I did wish
to oppose the Bill

⁴⁶ For an account of Olson's influence in Britain see Gavin Selerie, 'From Weymouth back: Olson's British contacts, travels, and legacy', in *Contemporary Olson*, ed. by David Herd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp. 113–26.

⁴⁷ In Montague's case, the precedent was more varied, combining the American 'open' poem with the example of Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926). In a 1989 preface to the poem, Montague noted: 'Although living in Berkeley introduced me to the debate on open-form from *Paterson*, through Olson, to Duncan, I was equally drawn by rooted poets like MacDiarmid in *A Drunk Man...*'. John Montague, *The Rough Field*, 5th edn (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990), p. vii.

but I dared not do it
for fear I had missed ... (CP 29-30)

While indentation enforces *something* of a distinction here between visual observation and historical knowledge, the tendency of the two half-rhyming couplets is to collapse history into the lyric mode. Far from an abrupt transition from perception to exposition, the return to couplets appears to insist on the consistency between history and visual perceptivity. If ‘The Upshot’ found no solution to the hindrance of excessive ‘knowing’, ‘Matthew Glover’ is similarly sceptical about detaching immediate acquaintance from descriptive fact. While the long passage beginning ‘Enclosures in this parish cut up’ (CP 27) marks itself off as expository near-prose, the later movements of the poem meld historical interpretation with more direct seeing.

THE JOURNALS

Langley’s impromptu bibliography of frequently read books reveals a coherent—if unorthodox—account of modern literature and philosophy. A dominant theme is the irony which attends any cerebral effort to jettison the intellect, or the paradox of reason holding itself to account. The British psychoanalytic literature (Milner, D. W. Winnicott, Melanie Klein, Wilfred Bion) represents one version of the classic modern effort to challenge the primacy of reason, while Milner’s experiments in ‘blind thinking’ finds an art critical cognate in Stokes’s aesthetic instancy. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* the embodied subject usurps the privileged position traditionally granted to a detached consciousness, while in John Cage’s *Silence* abstract reason is critiqued with *faux-naïf* astringency. Similarly, Bresson’s *Notes on Cinematography* insist that the cinematographer should ‘stick exclusively to impressions, to sensations’ and allow ‘no intervention of intelligence’ or, as he subsequently puts it, ‘[n]o intellectual or cerebral mechanism. Simply a mechanism.’⁴⁸ American modernist poetics from

⁴⁸ Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, pp. 17-18.

Pound through to Olson and Oppen also stake out positions antithetical to abstract or instrumental reasoning, whether through the ideogram, ‘proprioception’ or phenomenology.⁴⁹

Yet as ‘The Upshot’ and ‘Matthew Glover’ suggest, Langley’s work registers the attraction of indirect, propositional knowledge at the same time that it recognises the barriers such knowledge might present to aesthetic or sensuous immediacy. This ambivalence also persists as a structural tension throughout Langley’s *Journals*, which he began to compose in 1969.⁵⁰ Instalments of the journal were first published in *PN Review* in 2002 and at the time of writing (late 2016) are continuing to appear in that venue.⁵¹ In 2006 Shearsman published a selection of entries from 1970 to 2005.⁵² Though Jeremy Noel-Tod’s editorial notes to the *Complete Poems* confirmed a close working relationship between the journals and the poems, it would be a mistake to regard the journals as a mere repository of impressions waiting to be worked up (or over) into poetry. The journals are works in their own right and often approach problems of perception and knowledge with the same rigour as the poems. Indeed, these entries are amenable to a similar kind of textual analysis, since Langley’s epistemological concerns are worked out here at the level of prose device. In the following passage, excerpted from an entry of August 1982, the subject is not Harlech beach in Gwynedd, Wales, so much as its representation to the senses and through the faculty of Langley’s acquired—linguistic—intelligence:

Pure postcard on Tuesday. Puffs of cloud overland, and thin cirrus over the sea. Hot enough in the wind to redden us all on Harlech beach. Into the dunes there, barefoot and careful for glass and harsh marram. A sudden glaucous blue patch, like litter, but it is cool sea-holly, tough and heavy. Rest harrow everywhere. Carline thistles, intricate, with glossy white-gold rays. Hollows floored with creeping willow, with catkins, and knotted pearlwort. The mashed urchin cases, chalky,

⁴⁹ Charles Olson, ‘Proprioception’, in *Collected Prose*, ed. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 179-99.

⁵⁰ See Noel-Tod, ‘Introduction’, p. x.

⁵¹ See R. F. Langley, ‘From the Journals of R. F. Langley’, *PN Review* 43.1 (September/October 2016), 21 (p. 21).

⁵² R. F. Langley, *Journals* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2006).

broken, papery, in middens at the waterline. The leathery horseshoe prints, which are the eggs of the necklace shell, sunk in gleaming sand. A damp apple core, shoved into dry sand, with suggestions of sand in the teeth, grit in saliva, cut tongues, spit not thick enough. A crow opens and lifts off with a tilt from the wrack. Crab bits. Pin eyes. White legs. Closed claws. Flies swirl up and land on wrists, with offensive feet. Is there a smell of fish? Yet, also, there is a sudden sweetness in the air, or detected on the fingers. As you come out, the sea warms the backs of your calves. Soft, ropey weed wraps your knees.⁵³

Langley balked at the idea that he was ‘any sort of surrealist’, insisting that he was concerned with the ‘observation of fact’.⁵⁴ Yet the two positions occupy extreme ends of the same spectrum, at least in a passage such as this. The rapid shifts of scale, for instance, closely recall the disorientating quality of early twentieth-century cinematic montage (‘A crow opens and lifts off with a tilt from the wrack. Crab bits. Pin eyes’).⁵⁵ Such parataxes, cutting from wide angle to extreme close-up, may present the ‘facts’, but they also try the reader’s ability to supply a context, or imagine a world, in which those two orders of magnitude (the sky and the eyes of a crab) might eventually coincide. In the later journal entries, this rapid alternation between deep and shallow focus becomes both a perceptual exercise and a self-conscious literary technique: ‘Clarity. Nitidus. Tidy. The bird over there and the spiders here’.⁵⁶

But the ‘observation of fact’ presents even further difficulties. For Langley, according to Prynne, to know ‘the difference between a martin and a swift’ was to know ‘everything’.⁵⁷ At the same time, there is every difference between the ‘smell of a fish’ and the experience of ‘sea-holly’, ‘marram’ and ‘pearlwort’; none of which would stand out distinctively without acquired botanical knowledge. Musical nouns (‘carline’, ‘marram’) register the intervention of knowledge by

⁵³ Langley, *Journals*, p. 29.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Bradford, ‘The Long Question of Poetry’, p. 16.

⁵⁵ N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge regard shifts of scale as distinctive of Prynne’s work. See Reeve and Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much: The Poetry of J. H. Prynne* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), chapter 1.

⁵⁶ Langley, *Journals*, p. 105.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Noel-Tod, ‘Introduction’, p. xiii.

description, with direct physical acquaintance (the ‘smell of a fish’) quickly superseded by the botanical catalogue.

However, the authority of the resonant proper noun does not go unchecked. Even in this passage, the terminological exactitude of the beach flora is pitched against vaguer and more ordinary—even conventional—constructions: ‘crab bits’, ‘puffs of cloud’, ‘ropey weed’, ‘white legs’. There is, in other words, a transition between sense-data and acquired knowledge; a movement reflected in both lexical choice and syntax (‘crab bits’ and ‘pin eyes’ do not make full sentences). Occasionally, this produces strange effects. For instance, there are ‘puffs of cloud over land’ but ‘cirrus over the sea’; the first suggesting a quick registering of the skyline (and therefore a cliché), the second a more considered, informed characterisation. Then again, maybe ‘puffs’ was chosen to alliterate with ‘pure postcard’, another deliberate cliché? In either case, a fluid diction and syntax represents a variable meeting with the scene; at one moment unreflective, at another moment approached through the medium of prior understanding. The temptation to equate things with their description survives alongside a recognition that ‘intense ignorance’ (however inaccessible) might be the more dependable ground of knowledge.⁵⁸

‘NICK-NACK OF NAMES’

Pound had already offered one possible solution to the contradiction between indirect knowledge and perceptual instancy. Insisting that ‘we should read less, far less than we do’, the poet proposed a more efficient approach to the organisation of learning.⁵⁹ Looking to history, we need not know that ‘so-and-so was, in such-and-such a year, elected Doge. So-and-so killed the tyrant. So-and-so was banished for embezzling State funds’.⁶⁰ Such facts ‘tell us nothing we did

⁵⁸ Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Ezra Pound, ‘I gather the Limbs of Osiris’, in *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, ed. by William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 23.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

not know, nothing which enlightens us'.⁶¹ Instead, Pound says, we should recover the small 'interpreting detail' which breaks open the full significance of its historical moment.⁶² Put simply, the poet should render history in a series of *images*; details which reveal—instantly, like Stokes's 'Quattro Cento' style—the entire timbre of their moment.

In the later cantos, particularly the 'Adams' and 'China' cantos, this method is stretched almost to breaking point. Pound is more comfortable with 'so-and-so' and 'such-and-such' in Rapallo than he was in London. Langley's later oeuvre might also suggest a less ambivalent embrace of erudition. While the later poems still play variations on Langley's familiar vocabulary of themes and ideas, they take a different stance toward the function of knowledge by description, particularly that of nomenclature. In the late 'To a Nightingale', for instance, the proper nouns of natural history accumulate in even seven-syllable lines as if to hold off the approach of 'nothing'; a world prior to verbal distinctions:

Nothing along the road. But
petals, maybe. Pink behind
and white inside. Nothing but
the coping of a bridge. Mutes
on the bricks, hard as putty,
then, in the sun, as metal.
Burls of *Grimmia*, hairy,
hoary, with their seed-capsules
uncurling. Red mites bowling
about on the baked lichen
and what look like casual
landings, striped flies, *Helina*,
Phaonia, could they be?
This month the lemon, I'll say
primrose-coloured, moths, which flinch
along the hedge then turn in
to hide, are Yellow Shells not
Shaded Broad-bars. Lines waver.
Camptogramma. Heat off the
road and the nick-nack of names.
Scotopteryx. Darkwing. The
flutter. Doubles and blurs the

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

margin. Fuscous and white. Stop
at nothing. To stop here at
nothing, as a chaffinch sings
interminably, all day. (CP 153)

As in ‘The Upshot’ (and perhaps with buried allusions to Shakespeare) the first half of the poem pivots around ‘nothing’s’ several senses. On the one hand, ‘nothing along the road’ might alert us to the fact of—in Viktor Shklovsky’s words—‘automatized perception’.⁶³ That is, ‘nothing’ is simply a conventionalised indifference to what is already *at hand*. However, ‘nothing’ also carries overtones from existential philosophy (particularly if we know that Langley was a reader of Sartre).⁶⁴ In this case, the eruption of proper nouns might be a verbal defence against a void (‘nothing’) which nomenclature only barely keeps at bay (the pronounced caesurae heighten the effect of accumulation). The more closely the speaker looks at ‘nothing’ the more promptly it calls upon the speaker’s command of natural history and its language: *Grimmia*, *Helina*, *Phaonia*, *Scotopteryx*, *Camptogramma*.

Even as the nouns pile up, however, scepticism gathers around the true extent of their value. If ‘Heat off the | road and the nick-nack of names’ is meant as an equivalence, for instance, the implication seems to be that the names reeled off by the speaker *distort* the objects before him, just as the ripples in a heat haze distort the road.⁶⁵ In this case, ‘Stop | at nothing. To stop here at | nothing’ does not describe the ‘flinch’ of the moths in the air or the flight of the chaffinch, but rather offers a warning to the speaker to avoid the Adamic inclination to fix things by their names. ‘Nothing’, in this reading, is not Shklovsky’s automatic indifference or the

⁶³ Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. by Benjamin Sher (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), p. 12.

⁶⁴ Sartre appears in Jeremy Noel-Tod’s notes to ‘Mariana’, ‘The Upshot’ and ‘The Ecstasy Inventories’.

⁶⁵ Lacy Rumsey notes that ‘nick-nack’ may also refer to a ‘petty trick or subterfuge’. Rumsey, ‘On R. F. Langley’s “To a Nightingale”’, *Études britanniques contemporaines* <<https://ebc.revues.org/3478>> [accessed 5 June 2017]. Rumsey positions ‘To a Nightingale’ between the English Romantic and American modernist traditions.

‘nothing’ which, for Sartre, the subject is ‘to begin with’.⁶⁶ Rather, it is the receptive ‘emptiness’ of ‘The Upshot’ or Bresson’s passionate ignorance. The second half of the poem attests to this, moving incrementally to the position reached three decades earlier in ‘The Upshot’:

A chiff-chaff. Purring of two
turtle doves. Voices, and some
vibrate with tenderness. I
say none of this for love. It
is anyone’s giff-gaff. It
is anyone’s quelque chose.
No business of mine. Mites which
ramble. Caterpillars which
curl up as question marks. Then
one note, five times, louder each
time, followed, after a fraught
pause, by a soft cuckle of
wet pebbles, which I could call
a glottal rattle. I am
empty, stopped at nothing, as
I wait for this song to shoot.
The road is rising as it
passes the apple tree and
makes its approach to the bridge. (CP 153-4)

The speaker ‘could’ refer to their ‘soft cuckle’ by way of linguistics and phonology (a ‘glottal rattle’), but would that make the ‘wet pebbles’ any more immediate? Though the question is apophatic (the metaphor appears even as it is called into question), it opens out into a moment of blind attention: ‘I am | empty, stopped at nothing, as | I wait for this song to shoot’.

Although the lines recall Emerson’s passage on the transparent eyeball (‘I am nothing’), Langley’s is a reverse Transcendentalism. Being ‘empty’ or ‘stopped at nothing’ does not spirit the speaker into ‘currents of the Universal Being’ but rather plants him more firmly on the ground.⁶⁷ The

⁶⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (York: Methuen, 2013), p. 30.

⁶⁷ Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p. 10.

‘radically pared’ language, as Jeremy Noel-Tod describes it, underscores this retreat.⁶⁸ Yet the speaker only reaches firm ground through the *via negativa* represented by the ‘nick nack of names’ and their tendentious promise of immediacy. In ‘To a Nightingale’, at least, the physical eye and the erring brain meet with one another, as if ‘emptiness’ could only be approached, negatively, through a veil of language.

Though it invites reading within the context of the ode form in general and Keats in particular, ‘To a Nightingale’ also attends to the characteristic problems of Langley’s work. Oblique to the British late modernism of the Cambridge School and language-centred tendencies in the United States, Langley’s small body of poetry works with quiet persistence through the intransigence of experience and towards a language adequate to its uncertainties.

The New American Poetry, and perhaps especially the work of Charles Olson, was a crucial impetus for the early work, as it was for the poetry of Prynne, Tom Raworth, Peter Riley and others among Langley’s contemporaries. Moreover, Langley shared with Prynne and other British late modernists an early critical interest in the problems of perception and the new literature of phenomenology, the key works of which began to appear in English in the early 1960s.⁶⁹ However, Langley’s keen ‘observation of fact’ charted an independent course, combining radical empiricism with self-conscious scrutiny of the apparatus of perception.⁷⁰

While Prynne, for instance, often exposes the linguistic and epistemic structures through which knowledge is controlled and instrumentalized, Langley maintains attention to the problem of perception and knowledge at the level of the experiencing subject. Indeed, in Langley’s writing the ambivalent modulation between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description is

⁶⁸ Jeremy Noel-Tod, “‘In different voices’: Modernism since the 1960s’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 114.

⁶⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) appeared in an English translation by Colin Smith in 1962.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Bradford, ‘The Long Question of Poetry’, p. 16.

both revealed and dramatized, with the ‘clear physical eye’ of American modernist poetics competing with the ulterior claims of natural history, social history and the history of art.⁷¹

This ‘alertness to perception’, in Prynne’s words, does not quite exhaust Langley’s practice.⁷² Major poems such as ‘Juan Fernandez’, for instance, are less directly empirical and more recalcitrantly allusive.⁷³ Moreover, Langley’s practice was far from fixed, eventually availing itself of ‘all available strategies’, as the poet put it in 1994.⁷⁴ In the late work this means not only new experiments with rhyme but also a more willing accommodation of ‘autobiographical experiences’.⁷⁵ Indeed, in late poems such as ‘To a Nightingale’ Langley’s investigation of perception almost *requires* what Olson had condemned as the ‘lyrical interference of the individual as ego’.⁷⁶

Even so, ‘opening up to what is there’ (as the poet himself described the practice of William Carlos Williams) foregrounds Langley’s extended negotiation with both modernist poetics and a wider modern literary and philosophical analysis of perception.⁷⁷ Quoting the Pre-Raphaelite painter Ford Madox Brown, Langley would describe such work as verbal, ongoing, and ultimately unfinishable. Its subject: “Not things, but seeing things.”⁷⁸

⁷¹ Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, p. 159.

⁷² Quoted in Noel-Tod, ‘Introduction’, p. xiii.

⁷³ Langley described ‘Juan Fernandez’ as ‘a denser sort of thing altogether’. Langley and Walker, ‘R. F. Langley Interviewed by R. F. Walker’, p. 251.

⁷⁴ R. F. Langley, ‘Note’ (1994), in *Complete Poems*, ed. by Jeremy Noel-Tod (Manchester: Carcanet, 2015), p. xvii.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, p. 247.

⁷⁷ Langley and Walker, ‘R. F. Langley Interviewed by R. F. Walker’, p. 248.

⁷⁸ Langley, ‘Note’, p. xvii.